



STOREFRONTS

MAIN STREET IOWA TECHNOTES

One of the most important elements of a downtown business is the storefront. It is the storefront that largely expresses the business' image to the potential customer. The storefront should lure passers-by to stop, look at the goods on display and wander into the store to browse further.

Traditional storefronts were designed to be flexible, simple and inexpensive to build. Made of readily available local materials, they are a simple forthright expression of local craftsmanship. The storefront is a box for selling. Its primary purpose is to assist in the sale of merchandise. This role is one reason why a traditional storefront is almost totally transparent. Even early merchants realized the importance in trying to eliminate the separation of the interior and exterior spaces and blur the line between the public realm (sidewalk) and private space (store interior). In a long narrow building, the storefront also was a key source of natural light.

Storefront Design

Every traditional downtown building had a well defined opening that the storefront filled. The storefront is defined by the vertical piers (often brick) on each end, a storefront cornice (sometimes

decorative, sometimes just a simple metal beam) and the sidewalk. The storefront itself is usually slightly recessed within this opening, about six inches. Virtually the entire storefront is glass.

The upper most glass is the transom window. These windows provided natural light for the interior. These windows might be clear glass, but a wide variety of specialty glass is also common.

The display windows dominate the storefront. Clear glass is important to allow for easy viewing of merchandise displays and the interior. Numerous panes and heavy muntin bars should be avoided as they disrupt the view of the merchandise and interior.

A kickplate or bulkhead is the bottom most element of the storefront.

These areas are used to raise the display area off the sidewalk. These kickplates also help to protect the storefront windows from shovels, bicycles and all the other elements of downtown life. Kickplates can be made from numerous materials. One of the most common is wood, especially on historic buildings. Other common materials include brick, various types of stone and ceramic tile.

The entrance is a key component to a storefront. Typically recessed, this achieves a number of important roles. A slight recess provides a sense of protection and transition for the customer. It also helps to highlight the entry with the change in layout. A recessed entry also allows the door to swing out (a code requirement) and not swing into the sidewalk area. (Also a common code requirement, but a good idea regardless.)

Rebuilding Storefronts

Over the years, storefronts often undergo many transformations, some better than others. Problems arise in storefront design when the storefront fails to remain within its defined opening. This makes the storefront appear "pasted on" the front of the building. Reducing the amount of glass in the storefront is another common situation.





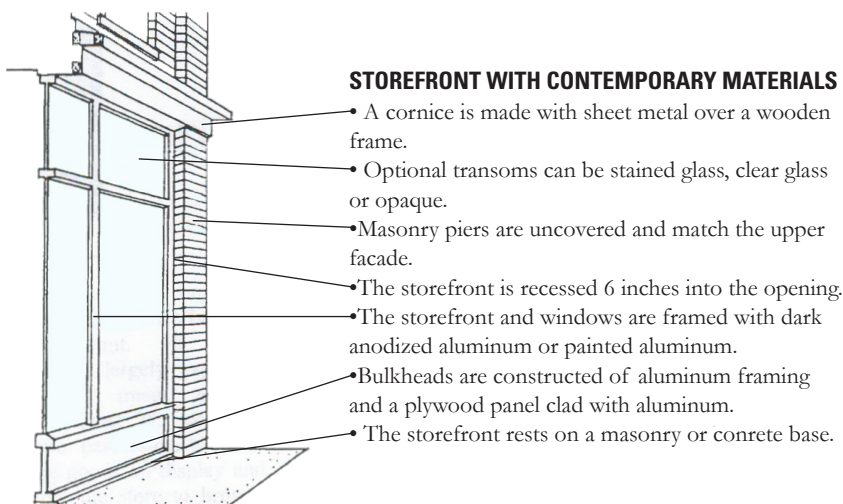
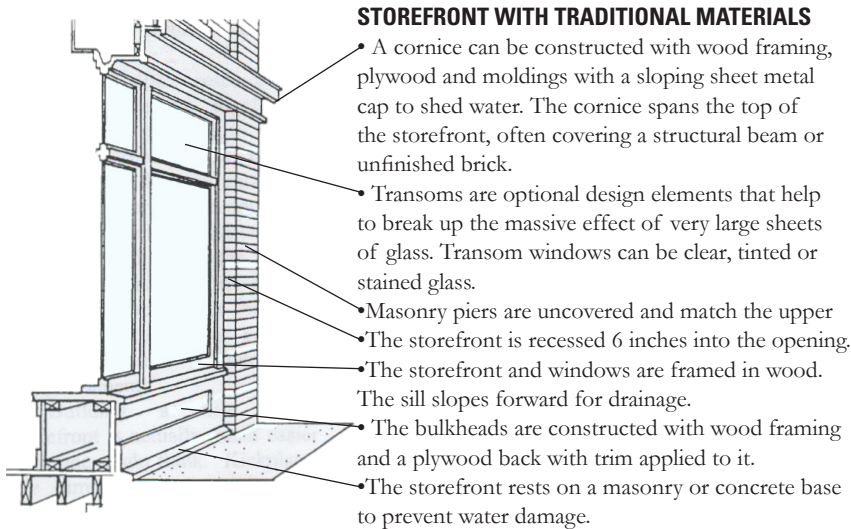
With a little research and some investigative digging, it may be quite possible to restore your storefront to its original design. Any historic photos are invaluable for proportions and details. Some investigation in the basement and along the ceiling may show original layouts including the recess for the door. Decorative cast iron columns might still exist behind later “improvements.”

Building a new “old” storefront is actually much easier than one might think. Kickplates are simple frame construction. The decorative panels can be as simple as a plywood sheet with 1X6’s as a frame. Some molding or a bevel cut on the inside of the 1X6 makes a fancy detail. A more elaborate kickplate uses a traditional raised panel in the center instead of the flat plywood. Storefront windows can be wood framed

and still use insulated glass.

Even with contemporary materials the traditional layout pattern should be used. Utilizing these traditional elements in new storefront design still makes sense. The new design should be simple and straightforward. Do not over decorate. This will make the new storefront compatible with any historic storefront in the district. Then the integrity of the streetscape is retained and enhanced.

The importance that quality storefronts play not only for individual merchants, but also for a successful downtown cannot be overstated. Understanding the characteristics of good storefront design is a key element for successful revitalization programs. By incorporating these characteristics storefronts will be successful whether made of traditional construction and materials or with more contemporary techniques.



For More Information:

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Additional Reading:

*Rehabilitating Historic Storefronts
Preservation Brief #11
Historic Building Facades
New York Landmark Conservancy*

*Building Improvement File
National Main Street Center*